

## **GOD'S ABSOLUTE RIGHTEOUSNESS**

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We are considering in our Sunday morning services the doctrines of grace. And these doctrines, as I explained last week, are really the doctrines of salvation. When we talk about the doctrines of grace, we are talking about the Gospel, we are talking about the message of God's redeeming plan for men. This includes, of course, a look into the hearts of men to see the tremendous need that exists in every human heart, expressed by many as total depravity. As we go on, we are going to see the sovereign way in which God has chosen people in every generation for salvation. We do not know who they are until they come to Christ. And they come to Christ because of the marvelous way in which God in His grace overrules in their lives to draw them to Himself. When the Lord Jesus Christ went to the cross, we believe that He went to the cross specifically to provide salvation for those whom He had chosen. Finally, the evidence that a person has truly been born again is that he will persevere in the faith. He may sin. He may fail the Lord as we all do. But his life is going to be characterized by perseverance right to the end. There is no such thing as a person being saved and losing his salvation. Nor is there such a thing as a person being saved and remaining the same in his life. His life is changed. These are the precious truths that are related to the great doctrine of salvation in Scripture.

Now let us keep in mind what we have learned before. I am thinking back now to our recent study in the book of Romans. When we talk about salvation, when we talk about the Gospel, we are talking about far more than just how a person is initially saved. Salvation as it is taught in Scripture not only includes this, but salvation includes what the Lord is doing in our lives while we are here on earth after we come to know Christ as our Saviour. It also includes our ultimate destiny, doesn't it? The three great words that are used in Scripture that make up salvation, as I have said over and over again, are justification, sanctification, and glorification. All three are included in that great Biblical word "salvation." And salvation, of course, is one of the major themes of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

But there are many things about the Gospel, the doctrines of grace, which people do not like. I suppose it would be right to say of unregenerate people that they do not like any part of it. But some object to one thing, or possibly more than one, and others object to other things. There certainly has not been one of the doctrines of grace which has not been opposed in every generation. And apart from the work of God upon the hearts of men, it is impossible for anyone to accept what Peter calls, "the true grace of God." That is his designation of the Gospel in 1 Peter, chapter 5, verse 12. What this means is that all truth has to be taught by the Holy Spirit. Before any person will accept these doctrines, the Holy Spirit must make them clear to him. The Holy Spirit is the One Who must teach us. And I trust that He will be doing just that as we proceed this morning.

One main reason for our rejection of the Gospel, in part or in whole, is because we do not know what God has been pleased to reveal about Himself in the Word. Now I realize it is due to the sinfulness of the human heart. But I am really introducing these doctrines this time as we go through them by spending some time thinking about what Scripture reveals about God. Last Sunday we were talking about the sovereignty of God. This morning I want to discuss with you the righteousness of God, the absolute righteousness of God. And to give you an example now of why the doctrines of grace are sometimes rejected, let me take the doctrine of election.

We will be discussing election at a later time. It is certainly taught, and clearly taught, in Scripture--although some seem to feel that we need to try to explain this doctrine away. Now this is what I mean by rejecting these truths. But listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, verses 13 and 14. He said, "But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now in these two verses you will see that the Apostle Paul really included all that I have been talking about this morning when I described what is included in salvation. How does a person come to the Lord Jesus Christ? He comes to the Lord Jesus Christ when he is called to God by the Gospel, by the preaching of the Gospel. And why do we see certain people responding to the Gospel? It is because God has from the beginning chosen them to salvation. And for what purpose has God chosen them and called them to salvation? And the answer is, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

But when we talk about the doctrine of election, some immediately say, "Well, it is not fair for God to do it that way." They think that the only way that God can be fair is to deal with all people in exactly the same way. And so they begin to look for ways to get around the doctrine of election just because it does not seem right to them.

Now people who do this are forgetting to look at God. They begin with their own reasoning, not with the Word of God. They have forgotten those verses which I reminded you of last Sunday morning, Isaiah 55, verses 8 and 9, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth" (and I do not know if anyone has ever measured that distance), "so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Some people choose to ignore passages which deal with election. They feel that it is best just to leave them alone. But they do not stop to think that by their actions, they are actually saying that God would have done better in giving us the Scripture to leave out any reference to election. They would say that it just makes people unhappy, and stirs up opposition. And they feel this way because this is not the way that they would have planned salvation if they were going to provide salvation for men. But if we believe that the Bible is the Word of God, then we must believe that God has included in the Bible those things which He intended for us to know. It is not an accident that the doctrine of election is found in Scripture. Everything in the Bible is important and cannot be ignored without displeasing God, without robbing Him of the glory which rightfully belongs to Him. In the passage which I read to you just a moment ago from 2 Thessalonians, chapter 2, Paul began his statement about salvation by saying, "But we are bound," (we have an obligation, we have a duty) "to give thanks always to God for you." So you see, if these doctrines are not true, and we are, after all, the ones who are actually responsible for getting

ourselves into salvation, then all of the glory does not belong to God. But the Apostle Paul says we have a duty, we are bound to give thanks, because He chose you, and He called you "to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Another thing that we must keep in mind, if we believe that the Bible is the Word of God, is that we have in the Bible everything that is sufficient for us to understand what God wants us to know. And we have the Holy Spirit to teach us.

Now let me go back for just a moment to the doctrine of election again because I am using this as an illustration since this is where so many people seem to direct their opposition to the doctrines of grace. Was God fair in electing certain people to salvation, but not in electing everybody to salvation? And the answer to that question is, Yes! And the proof of the answer is to be found in what the Scriptures say about the righteousness of God. If we understand that God is righteous, and that He has chosen to elect certain people to salvation, then we will know that He has been righteous in doing this even though it may not seem so to us.

Now I want to do three things this morning in thinking of our text. One is that I want to define righteousness so that we will all understand what we are talking about. Secondly, I want you to see from this passage of Scripture in Psalm 119, which has been read for us, the teaching of Scripture regarding the righteousness of God. And then, finally, I want us to think for just a few moments about some of the practical effects of believing in the righteousness of God as far as salvation is concerned.

## **I. THE MEANING OF GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS**

Now what is the meaning of God's righteousness?

This is a profound word. Among other things it means that God is always right in what He does. He is never wrong. God is never unjust. There is nothing that God ever does which can in any way be characterized as sin. He is incapable of sinning because He is absolutely, totally righteous in His nature, in His own Person. Paul wrote in Titus 1:2 that God cannot lie. James wrote in James 1:13 that God cannot be tempted with evil. Now this is where we need to begin if we are to understand the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The very nature of sin is determined by the nature of God. Sin is anything that is contrary to the nature of God. Consequently, if God's very being is the standard of what is right and wrong, then He cannot sin, He cannot ever, under any circumstances, do anything that is wrong.

Now think of this in relation to these doctrines of grace. Since the Bible teaches that only some are elected by God to salvation, we must conclude not only that the doctrine of election is right, but that it in a very special way brings glory to God. And so we cannot reject it; we cannot reject any of the doctrines of grace. We cannot reject any part of this wonderful truth of salvation. We must not try to explain them away. We cannot even be guilty of ignoring them. But we must seek to understand them, to believe them, to rejoice in them, and to praise God for them because the whole truth of salvation has been designed preeminently for the glory of God. So when the Scriptures speak, as they do from Genesis to Revelation, about the righteousness of God, we are to understand that everything about salvation is right.

## **II. THE TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE**

Please turn again, if you will, to Psalm 119. In many respects it is a kind of compendium of all that you find in the Word of God. I could use other passages of Scripture because, when we talk about the righteousness of God, we could go to many passages in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, and any of them would be satisfactory. But there seems to have been in the mind of the psalmist a special concern about the righteousness of God in this particular section of Psalm 119. I want to point out four things that he mentioned here with respect to the righteousness of God.

First of all, he mentioned that God is righteous. If there is any question in your mind about this, notice how it is stated in verse 137: "Righteous art thou, O LORD." Now this is what God is in His being. He is right; He is holy. Consequently, He is incapable of doing anything that is wrong, as I have just explained.

There are other passages that teach the same thing. Let me give you just a few of them. I do not believe you will have time to turn to them, but you might want to jot the references down so that you can refer to them a little bit later.

You will remember, I trust, that shortly before Moses died, he gave the children of Israel a great song. I am not talking about the one in Exodus 15. That is a great one, too. It is interesting to see that the ministry of Moses to the children of Israel was marked by the writing of a great psalm at the beginning of his ministry, and the writing of a great psalm at the end of his ministry. The one at the end of his ministry was written for the children of Israel to remember so that whenever they got away from the Lord and were transported from their own land to other lands, because of their sinful disobedience against God, they would remember this psalm, and in singing it would have their hearts drawn back to God, the nation would then repent, and God would then bring them back to their land.

One of the verses in this psalm (Deut. 32:4), is this: "He is the Rock," speaking of the Lord, "his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he." Now this came right at the beginning of the psalm because, if the children of Israel in their departure from the Lord, and in their disobedience to His Word, were ever to get a true picture of the circumstances of their lives whenever they got away from the Lord, they had to begin by being reminded of the fact that God is righteous in whatever He does. If they were in a foreign land, suffering, it was still under the righteousness of God. And it was as they remembered the righteousness of God that they would be brought back in their hearts to the Lord.

To cite another example, when Jehoshaphat was charging the judges whom he had appointed over Judah, listen to what he said to them (2 Chronicles 19:6, 7): "Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in the judgment. Wherefore now let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts." So as Jehoshaphat sent his judges out, he said, "Remember you are not out there to please man, but you are out there to please God, and the one thing that you must remember about God is that He is a righteous God. And you must judge the people in view of the righteousness of God."

Psalm 92 has many verses that refer to this. I will read to you verses 12 and 15 where the psalmist said, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon." He was describing the people of God. But this is the reason: "To show that the LORD is upright: he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him."

When Zephaniah, the prophet, a prophet that you do not hear very much about these days, was rebuking Judah's princes and judges and the priests and her prophets, he reminded them that in their midst was the "just LORD," (Zeph. 3:5)--the righteous Lord, and He would not do any iniquity nor be a part of any iniquity.

Isaiah, another prophet, described the Lord in Isaiah 57:15 as "the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy."

Let me conclude this with what Paul said in Romans, chapter 1, verses 16 and 17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith." The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is made up of these wonderful doctrines of grace. So basic to an understanding of the Gospel is this truth, "Righteous art thou, O LORD."

But now a second thing is stated in Psalm 119, in the second part of the 137th verse, and that is that the Lord is righteous in his judgment. Now this means that the Lord is righteous in the way He deals with us. The Lord is righteous in His ways. He is always righteous in what He does. You and I may not understand this morning what He is doing with us. Perhaps you are under a cloud of some kind, or going through some difficulty, or testing. But remember that your heart will be kept in peace if you will remember that the fault is never with God, that God is righteous in His dealings with us. And here we can also turn to some other passages of Scripture.

Psalm 145:17 is a wonderful verse which states, "The LORD is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works." You see, it follows that if God Himself is righteous in His person and is incapable of sin, then everything that He does has to be right. So if you relate this to the doctrine of election, or you relate this to what the Scriptures say about the sinfulness of the human heart, God is always right, God is always righteous, God is always true in the things that He says.

Not everything that Job's friends said to him was true. But there were things that they said that were true. Bildad said, "Does God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice?" (Job 8:3). Elihu said, ". . . far be it from God, that he should do wickedness; and from the almighty, that he should commit iniquity." (Job 34:10). So apply these truths to the doctrines of grace, and you find that though we may not understand them to begin with, we may have difficulty with them, and, to be sure, all of them have problems because God's thoughts and our thoughts are so completely different, yet God is righteous and holy in what He does. And if He chooses some to be saved but does not choose all to be saved, then remember that He is righteous in doing this. The Word of God makes that very, very clear.

Now a third thing that our text in Psalm 119 tells us when we think about the teaching of Scripture regarding this matter of the righteousness of God, is that His Word, W-o-r-d, is righteous. Will you notice this in at least three verses in this passage: Verse 138, in our text, "Thy testimonies that thou hast commanded are righteous and very faithful." Verse 140, "Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it." This is what the psalmist found the Word of God to be. That which God had revealed was not defiled. There was no mistake. God had not done anything wrong. It was a pure Word because it had come from God. And then in the 142nd verse, at the end of the verse, he said, ". . . thy law is the truth." So when we come to the Word of God and find things that are difficult for us to understand, and they do not seem to fit with the way I would do things, remember that we must bow to the Word of God.

This is the truth. The way I would do things might be the wrong way. The way God has done it is the right way, the perfect way, the righteous way. And so, consequently, we need to understand His Word in that light.

But then there is a fourth point that I want you to see in connection with this. Now I have said that God is righteous, that His ways are righteous, and that His Word is righteous. But you will notice that both in connection with God and His Word, the psalmist brought out that this righteousness is an everlasting righteousness. Look at the 142nd verse: "Thy righteousness is an everlasting righteousness." Also in the last verse of our text we read, "The righteousness of thy testimonies is everlasting: give me understanding, and I shall live." Now what does this mean? Well, this means that we never need to revise the Bible. It means that what is true in one generation is going to be true in the following generation. We may have new translations of our Bible, but God has never authorized the revision of the Bible. God has never authorized a revision of the truth that we find in the Scriptures. His righteousness remains the same, and what He has said in His Word is everlastingly righteous. So that as long as time goes on, this Word will remain unchanged and will continue to bear the stamp of the God Who is only righteous in all that He is and righteous in all that He does. This is really tremendous truth that the psalmist has given us in this passage of Scripture. And it applies to all of the Word of God. It applies to all of the ways of God. And so when you see God moving His people against nations, wiping out nations like Sodom and Gomorrah, and you see the judgments that are predicted in the last days of the world when a third of the world is going to be destroyed, just remember that God is righteous in everything that He does, and He is never wrong. And what He has given us in His Word is the truth that we are to believe. And we need to come to the doctrines of grace understanding this, not arguing with God, but bowing and submitting ourselves before Him.

### III. THE PRACTICAL EFFECTS

Now I want you to see, finally, some of the practical effects of holding to the righteousness of God, and to the righteousness of His Word, as they are related to the doctrines of grace. What effect are they going to have upon us?

When you and I come to understand that God has in His own sovereign will chosen certain people to be saved, that He sent the Lord Jesus Christ to die for the purpose of accomplishing their salvation, that He moves upon their hearts by the preaching of the Gospel to draw them to Himself (the Spirit of God using the Word), and that He so transforms them that they persevere in the faith unto the end. When you see the righteousness of God with respect to these doctrines, what is it going to do to you? What effect will they have upon your life?

Now you hear all kinds of things said. You hear that this discourages prayer. You hear people say, "Well now, this is going to destroy missions and destroy evangelism because, if God has done this, why you know there is no point in us preaching the Gospel." But they are ignoring the fact that the Word of God tells us that we must preach the Gospel, we must go to the ends of the earth proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. However, let us see what the Word says. Let us see what our text says about how an understanding of the righteousness of God, and of all that God does with respect to salvation, is going to affect us.

Look at the 139th verse. I want to give you six things from this passage to show you what an understanding of the righteousness of God, and the righteousness of His ways, and the righteousness of His

Word, are going to do to your life when the Spirit of God really makes them a reality in your life.

The first thing that the psalmist said is that it gave him zeal, z-e-a-l. He said, "My zeal hath consumed me, because mine enemies have forgotten thy words." Now I do not know of anything that will give you a greater zeal for the work of God and a greater concern for the souls of men than understanding these great doctrines that have to do with our salvation, the doctrines of the grace of God. Instead of killing evangelism you are going to find that they will give you a greater burden for the spiritual needs of men than you have ever experienced before. You will come to the place where you can say with the psalmist, "My zeal hath consumed me." Here is the expression of a tremendous burden. What has he been talking about? Why he has been saying, "Righteous art thou, O LORD, and upright are thy judgments. Thy testimonies that thou hast commanded are righteous and very faithful." He said in effect, "I look into the Word of God and I see these things that the Scriptures tell me about Yourself, and about what You are doing, and about the Word that You have given, and consequently my zeal has reached a pitch that it has never known before. It has consumed me."

The second thing you will see is stated in verse 140: "Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it." You know, I do not know how many of you have said to me that when you start to see the doctrines of grace, they just seem to pop up everywhere in Scripture. They are all through the Word of God. This is not something that is confined to one little part of the Word. When the psalmist saw that God was righteous in His ways, it made him love the Word of God. And they will make you delight in the Word of God, too. You will love to hear these truths proclaimed because they give such glory, honor, and praise to God. The person who rejects the doctrines of grace has certain parts of the Word that he does not enjoy. If he is teaching the Word of God and comes to a passage which deals with some of these doctrines which are distasteful to him, he will jump over them and begin to talk about something else. But the person who sees what God has done, who understands the righteousness of God and the righteousness of His Word, loves all of the Word of God. There is no part of the Word of God that he cannot go to and delight in what God has said.

The third thing that I want you to see is in verse 141. Somehow you always get a statement like this whenever you are concerned with the righteousness of God, with the holiness of God, with the majesty of God. When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up, as I think I reminded you last Sunday, his immediate response was: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isa. 6:5). When you understand the righteousness of God, it is going to make you realize how small and despised you are. You see, the reason we can talk so much about the greatness of man, about self-worth, about self-love--the reason we can glorify men and the things that they are doing (and often we hear more about men than we do about God), is because we are not hearing enough about the righteousness of God. When we begin to understand the righteousness of God, and the righteousness of His ways, and the righteousness of His Word, we, too, are going to say, "I am small and despised: yet do I not forget thy precepts." When you see what is revealed in Scripture about the human heart, you will be brought down to the lowest level. There is nothing that is going to humble you any more than to see what the Word of God had to say about man and his sin. But that which keeps us from being overwhelmed when we begin to see the depravity of the human heart is that we can say with the psalmist, ". . . yet do not I forget thy precepts." What do I find in the Word of God that keeps me from being overwhelmed? Why I find that God has seen fit to deal with men according to His grace, that there is mercy with God, there is forgiveness, there is all that I need as one who is small and despised. I stand exposed before the righteousness of God. But my hope is in the Word of God. Thank God, in the light of holy Scripture I

see the tremendous compassion and love and mercy of God toward sinners, and this is what gives me hope.

Look at verse 143 for the fourth one: "Trouble and anguish have taken hold on me: yet thy commandments are my delights." Understanding the righteousness of God gives us peace in times of trouble. Understanding the doctrines of grace and seeing the righteousness of God gives us peace when things are going wrong. We all go through these times, don't we? Troubles and trials come, and we are inclined to say, "Well, what have I done? Why should this happen to me? Why should I be going through these experiences?" Read the story of Job. He was the holiest man on the face of the earth, by the testimony of God Himself, and yet who of us has suffered like Job suffered, losing all of his possessions, losing all of his family, and finally losing his health. And yet Job in the midst of all of the trouble said, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:15). Though it seems inconceivable that a man like Job would have to go through such things, yet we realize that God knew just exactly what He was doing with Job. And Job came out of that dreadful experience saying, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5, 6). "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee" (Isa. 26:3). And part of keeping your mind stayed upon the Lord is to remember that He is righteous, and sovereign, and holy in all of His ways.

The fifth advantage of knowing that the righteousness of God is revealed in the doctrines of grace: It makes us realize that we need to be taught of God. And notice, in passing, that understanding the righteousness of God, and understanding that God is righteous in His judgments, understanding that God is righteous in His Word, did not discourage prayer as far as the psalmist was concerned. Notice what he said in that 144th verse. He said, ". . . give me understanding." You see, the person who comes to understand the doctrines of grace has his eyes opened to see these wonderful truths of God's working upon the hearts of His men and what He is doing to accomplish our salvation. When we begin to see these things, it makes us realize how much there is about the ways and workings of God that we do not understand. And so we cry out to Him for greater understanding. As long as we live, we will never exhaust this wonderful Book and will never know the truths of Scripture with all of the fulness that we should. So the psalmist cried out that he might understand.

And then finally, as a sixth benefit of knowing that God's righteousness is to be seen in the doctrines of grace, the psalmist said, ". . . give me understanding, and I shall live." Now what did he mean by this? Obviously he was saved. Obviously he was enjoying eternal life. But he meant that such understanding was going to bring him to a fulness of life. The more we understand of the righteousness of God, the more we understand of the grace of God, the greater will be our peace and joy and blessing. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). That is the abundant life which the psalmist was referring to here. ". . . give me understanding, and I shall live." It means that the more we understand of the Word of God, and the more we understand of God Himself, the greater fulness, and joy, and blessing there is in knowing our wonderful Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

So the basis of our blessing is in knowing God. And to understand the Word, we must begin, as we have seen, not only by knowing that God is sovereign, but in knowing that God is righteously sovereign. Then it will be no wonder that Isaiah said, as I quoted a moment ago, that we are kept in perfect peace when our minds are stayed upon Him. And while the truths of salvation may not be what you and I would have planned them to be, yet God has made them perfectly righteous. Let this prayer of our text



be the prayer of our hearts, ". . . give me understanding, and I shall live." Reading from Psalm 116, verses 12 and 13, "What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD."